

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
December 11, 2003

**LAGUNA DE SANTA ROSA:  
RESTORATION MANAGEMENT PLAN AND PHASE II SEDIMENTATION STUDY**

File No. 03-138  
Project Manager: Maxene Spellman

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse two grants related to the restoration of the Laguna de Santa Rosa in Sonoma County as follows: 1) Disburse up to \$225,000 to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation to prepare a restoration management plan. 2) Disburse up to \$225,000 to the Sonoma County Water Agency to conduct a Phase II sedimentation study including design plans and environmental documentation for one or more habitat restoration and flood control projects.

**LOCATION:** The restoration management plan will encompass the Laguna de Santa Rosa Core Planning Area, 21,000 acres located in western Sonoma County south of the Russian River. Site-specific design plans of the Phase II sedimentation study will be located within the 28,000-acre watershed area that encompasses the Core Planning Area (see Exhibit 1).

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

---

**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Maps of the Core Study Area and Watershed  
Exhibit 2: Letters of Support

---

**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred twenty-five thousand dollars (\$225,000) to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation to create a restoration management plan, and disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred twenty-five thousand dollars (\$225,000) to the Sonoma County Water Agency to conduct a Phase II sedimentation study and create detailed designs and environmental documentation for one or more implementation projects, both disbursements related to the restoration of the Laguna de Santa Rosa in Sonoma County.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code 31160-31164.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
  3. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
- 

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The Laguna de Santa Rosa (the Laguna) is the largest freshwater wetland system in northern California. A complex of creeks, marshes, vernal pools, and ponds, the Laguna provides a key resting and feeding place for migratory birds traveling the Pacific Flyway. As part of the Russian River flood plain, the Laguna acts as a huge reservoir and collection basin for water overflowing the Russian River during flood stage. Today the 21,000-acre Laguna is a patchwork of agricultural, residential and commercial uses amid fragmented chunks of natural open space and publicly protected lands. The Laguna is also threatened by the spread of invasive primrose that is beginning to fill flood channels and alter the Laguna’s natural ecological functions. The two projects described below inter-relate to address the restoration of the Laguna’s natural sensitive habitats. The Phase II Sedimentation Study additionally addresses the restoration of the natural flood retention function of the Laguna. While in support of the Study’s multi-objective purpose, the Conservancy’s primary objective is to assist habitat restoration by providing funding for these two proposed projects:

Restoration Management Plan (RMP): The proposed RMP to be prepared by Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation (the Foundation) will include development of best management practices and ongoing management strategies for the various habitat types and for agricultural lands in the Laguna. The plan will also include a map identifying the locations of the invasive primrose and a strategy for its control. The RMP will utilize the recently completed Conservancy funded Laguna de Santa Rosa Protection Plan in which the Sonoma Land Trust mapped sensitive habitat types and agricultural lands and targeted priority properties for acquisition from willing sellers.

Sedimentation Study: The Conservancy will assist the Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) with the proposed Phase II of the Laguna sedimentation study. Phase II will involve the assessment for and preparation of detailed designs for one or more projects on publicly owned land that will reduce effects of sedimentation for habitat restoration and flood control. Phase II will additionally include preparation of the environmental documentation for the chosen project(s). Phase II follows the nearly completed Phase I of this study, which was initiated because SCWA requested the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) to determine if siltation has impacted the ability of the Laguna to provide wildlife habitat and to act as a flood control basin. Phase I, therefore, evaluates the causes of sedimentation and assesses restoration needs.

The Phase I sedimentation study and the proposed Phase II assessment and detailed design(s) will also provide important information to assist the Foundation to establish best management practices. SCWA, ACOE, and the Foundation participate in the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) for the sedimentation study. Coordination between the study and RMP is expected to occur in part through the TAC.

**Partnerships:** For the RMP, the Foundation and SCWA are working in partnership with the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT), the Sonoma County Agricultural and Open Space District (SCAPOS), the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sonoma County Regional Parks, and the Conservancy on the Laguna de Santa Rosa Working Group. The Working Group, established during the preparation of the “Laguna de Santa Rosa: Resource Atlas and Protection Plan” (Protection Plan), brings stakeholders together to share information and develop strategies to protect the Laguna. DFG has indicated that it will participate in the framing and creation of the RMP because the plan will provide critical information for DFG’s parcel-specific management plans for its Laguna properties, streamline DFG internal planning, and create an ecosystem-wide context for accomplishment of its habitat goals for the Laguna (see Letters of Support, Exhibit 2).

**Site Description:** Stretching from the City of Cotati to the Russian River, the Laguna de Santa Rosa is the Russian River’s largest tributary and the largest freshwater wetland in northern California. The Laguna drains 250 square miles, gathering water from its tributaries and from a watershed extending out to the surrounding mountains. This waterway gives its name to a biologically diverse expanse of freshwater marshes, wetlands, vernal pools, riparian forests, and oak woodlands extending over 21,000 acres. The core Laguna area, which is the focus of this project, is bounded on the east by Santa Rosa and on the west by the Sebastopol hills (see Maps of the Core Study Area and Watershed, Exhibit 1).

Since the coming of European settlers in the 1830s, the Laguna has been cleared, filled, channeled, drained, and developed into a patchwork of agricultural, residential, and commercial uses amid fragmented chunks of natural open space. Today 90 percent of the Laguna is in private ownership, three-fourths of which is used for agricultural operations. The agricultural operations are mostly dairies and vineyards. In the past 40 years, agricultural acreage has been converted to residential and commercial uses and the pressure for further development continues to mount. Real estate values in Sonoma County have escalated 20 to 30 percent in the past year, further increasing the urbanization pressures on the remaining undeveloped open space in the Laguna.

The Laguna continues to provide important regional functions as follows:

- The Laguna is habitat for migrating waterfowl and hundreds of species of plants, birds, fish, and invertebrates some of which are rare, threatened, or endangered, and passageway for salmonids and other anadromous fish.
- As part of the Russian River flood plain, the Laguna acts as a huge reservoir and collection basin for water overflowing the Russian River during flood stage thus lowering the flood levels down river. It also drains rainfall runoff from its own watershed and absorbs urban runoff.
- The Laguna is the site for one of the largest wastewater reclamation programs in the country known as the Subregional Wastewater Reclamation System. The system supplies much of its reclaimed water to agricultural lands in the Laguna and has protected and enhanced some of its wetlands.

- Having supported a relatively dense population of Native Americans who practiced sustainable management of the Laguna's abundant resources for food and shelter, the Laguna is a source of cultural and archeological resources.
- The Laguna provides open space and scenic value to 450,000 residents of Sonoma County.

**Project History:** In the early '90s the Foundation initiated a planning process that culminated in the preparation of a Coordinated Resource Management Plan (CRMP) for the Laguna. The CRMP, completed in 1995 by a task force of private organizations and public agencies, listed general objectives and produced a geographic focus to the 21,000-acre Core Planning Area.

In 2000 the Conservancy provided a grant to SLT to prepare a Protection Plan for the Core Planning Area. The Protection Plan, completed in May 2003, addresses multiple site-specific resource issues and targets priority properties for acquisition. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Working Group meets regularly to develop strategies for addressing the resource issues identified in the Protection Plan. The Working Group consensus is that two of the next steps in the preservation and protection of the Laguna are to: 1) commence with acquisition of priority properties from willing sellers, and 2) prepare the RMP to apply best management practices for restoration of sensitive resources.

Restoration Management Plan: In August 2003 the Foundation and Conservancy staff convened a meeting of a wider group of stakeholders, including among others the City of Santa Rosa and the Sonoma County Mosquito and Vector Control District, to refine the Foundation's proposal and to seek matching funds towards the production of the RMP. Partners demonstrated great interest and reinforced the importance of the project and the need for invasive plant removal for the health of the Laguna. The Conservancy and others (see the "Project Financing" section below) will assist the Foundation in preparing the RMP. Conservancy staff will continue to collaborate with the partners as a member of the Working Group. Completion of the RMP is expected to occur in early 2006.

Sedimentation Study: Also in 2000, at the request of the SCWA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers initiated a study to examine the impacts of erosion on the Laguna and its capacity to reduce flooding along the Russian River. Phase I of the study examines the sedimentation problem and is expected to be completed in the January 2004. The Conservancy will assist SCWA in its collaboration with ACOE to prepare Phase II, an evaluation and design plans and environmental documentation for one or more specific projects. Phase II is anticipated to also be completed in mid-2006.

## **PROJECT FINANCING:**

### **A. Financing for Restoration Management Plan**

Coastal Conservancy	\$225,000
Santa Rosa Utilities District	50,000
Community Foundation of Sonoma County	25,000
Sonoma County Water Agency	<u>25,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$325,000</b>

**B. Financing for Sedimentation Study Phase II - Project Design**

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 225,000
Sonoma County Water Agency	1,481,500
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	<u>1,706,500</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$3,413,000</b>

Conservancy funding for this project is expected to come from the Conservancy's FY 03/04 budget appropriation from the "Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Fund of 2002" (Proposition 50). These Proposition 50 funds may be used for coastal watershed projects for protection or restoration of land and water resources. Funds may be used for planning and permitting associated with restoration, as well as the restoration activities (Water Code Section 79570). The proposed project will accomplish these purposes by assisting in the development of the restoration management plan and the sedimentation study, and the preparation of environmental documentation that will allow for the restoration of the watershed and associated wetlands located at the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

As required by Proposition 50, Water Code §79507, the project is consistent with the following local and regional watershed plans: The *Laguna de Santa Rosa Coordinated Resource Management Plan* (April 1995), the *Laguna de Santa Rosa Park Master Plan*, 1993, and the *Laguna de Santa Rosa: Resource Atlas and Protection Plan* (May 2003). (For detailed discussion see the "Consistency with Local Plans" section below.) The project is also consistent with the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board's goal to protect beneficial resources, as described in the *Water Quality Control Board Plan for the San Francisco Bay Basin* (1995).

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project would advance the purposes of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31160-31164). The project is consistent with §31162, which authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects and award grants in the nine-county Bay Area to public and private agencies and organizations to help achieve the following goals: "protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance and . . . promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational or educational purposes". The restoration and management efforts funded by the proposed project will further these goals with respect to the Laguna de Santa Rosa, a natural and open space resource of great significance to the Bay Area region.

The proposed project is also consistent with §31163, which requires the Conservancy to "cooperate with cities, counties, districts, . . . nonprofit land trusts, . . . and other interested parties in identifying and adopting long-term resource . . . goals for the San Francisco Bay area." This project will utilize a collaborative process among private and public partners that will define restoration management goals and flood control and restoration projects for the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Finally, this project is appropriate for San Francisco Bay Conservancy Program priority under the criteria of §31163(d), because it is supported by adopted regional plans, serves regional constituency, can be implemented in a timely way, provides opportunities for resource restoration that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented, and includes matching funds from other sources of funding.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with the **San Francisco Bay Program/Goal Matrix** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the Goal Matrix specifically identifies the Laguna de Santa Rosa as a key area of significance.

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective B** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project continues planning efforts for restoration of the Russian River watershed, wetlands, and riparian habitat of the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Preservation and restoration of the Laguna de Santa Rosa is supported by multiple jurisdictions, legislators, and the community including the City of Santa Rosa, Sonoma County, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, the California Department of Fish and Game, Assemblymembers Patricia Wiggins and Pat Berg, and Senator Wesley Chesbro (see Letters of Support, Exhibit 2).
4. **Location:** The restoration management plan and sedimentation study will encompass the Laguna de Santa Rosa Core Planning Area, 21,000 acres located in western Sonoma County south of the Russian River. The Laguna de Santa Rosa is within the nine-county Bay Area.
5. **Need:** If work is not begun to provide Laguna landowners with restoration management practices and to address the invasive primrose problem, and if the proposed sedimentation study does not go forward, the Laguna's waterways and channels may be further degraded to the detriment of the sensitive resources and flood control functions of the Laguna.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Laguna extends over 21,000 acres in central Sonoma County and includes portions of the cities of Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, and Rohnert Park. It is the second largest freshwater wetland system in northern California and is a resource of cultural and archeological as well as biological, agricultural, open space, and scenic value to the 450,000 residents of Sonoma County. As part of the Russian River flood plain, the Laguna also serves the vital hydrologic function for county residents of mitigating flood levels by acting as a reservoir for water overflowing the Russian River during flood stage.

### **Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** The Restoration and Management Plan can be applied to the publicly owned properties immediately to protect sensitive natural resources from further degradation. Partners are commencing with the acquisition of priority properties for which the identification of best management practices for the various habitat types will be needed soon. Information and plans developed in Phase II of the sedimentation study is needed as soon as possible to address site-specific problems of sedimentation and to form the basis for the comprehensive RMP.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The RMP and sedimentation study are complimentary efforts to restore the declining conditions in the Laguna. Among the issues affecting the Laguna that a comprehensive restoration and management plan, sedimentation study and site-specific design plans will help solve are loss of habitat and species and decline in hydrologic function.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
12. **Readiness:** With the Laguna de Santa Rosa Protection Plan in place, the Foundation can utilize the site-specific information to begin work on the RMP right away. Also partners assisting with gathering information for mapping the invasive primrose have already begun work. Regarding the sedimentation study, SCWA, in collaboration with ACOE, is nearing completion of the Phase I that will allow work to begin on the proposed Phase II of the study early 2004.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the "Project History" section above.
15. **Cooperation:** The governmental and nonprofit organizations that participate on the Laguna de Santa Rosa Working Group will continue to coordinate the strategies for protecting and preserving the Laguna with the preparation of the RMP, the sedimentation study, and site-specific design plans. Besides the Foundation, SCWA, and ACOE, these groups include SLT, SCAPOSD, Sonoma County Regional Parks, DFG, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and a representative from Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey's office. The City of Santa Rosa Utilities District will contribute financing and SCAPOSD will provide technical assistance for the preparation of the RMP.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL PLANS:**

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOSD), in its Acquisition Plan 2000, adopted this year, named the Laguna de Santa Rosa as a priority riparian and wetland area for protection. The California Department of Fish and Game has designated the Laguna as a high priority "Wildlife Area." This designation grants pre-approval for acquisitions, allowing the agency to immediately purchase properties when offered for sale. The *Laguna de Santa Rosa Coordinated Resource Management Plan* (April 1995) includes the objectives to "preserve, restore, and enhance natural habitats, improve public access and education opportunities." The *Laguna de Santa Rosa Park Master Plan* (1993) calls for preservation and enhancement of the unique natural resources of the Laguna and surrounding area. Finally, the project is consistent with and will begin to implement the *Laguna de Santa Rosa: Resource Atlas and Protection Plan* (May 2003).

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The Restoration Management Plan and Phase II sedimentation study and detailed design plans proposed for the Laguna de Santa Rosa are statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262 in that they involve only planning for possible future actions which have not been approved, adopted, or funded. The Phase II sedimentation study will produce CEQA documentation for future restoration and flood control projects of the Phase II design plans.